

Harper's plan helps women only as baby-makers



By **Antonia Zerbisias** Living Columnist

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Tuesday, on the *Star's* op-ed page, Prime Minister Stephen Harper announced that he would "mobilize" world leaders to save the lives of women and children around the world.

"As president of the G8 in 2010," he wrote, "Canada will champion a major initiative to improve the health of women and children in the world's poorest regions."

He cited some horrifying statistics: "Each year, it is estimated that 500,000 women lose their lives during pregnancy or childbirth. Further, an astonishing 9 million children die before their fifth birthday."

Hmm. These are numbers I have repeated noted in this column and on my blog – often to the derision of Harper supporters.

Anyway, there's another statistic, one he conveniently left out. According to the same sources, some 70,000 women a year die from botched illegal abortions.

But let's not go there today.

Now, I am the last person on Earth not to applaud any concerted effort to help women. Feminists have long said that women's rights are human rights – an idea that is finally sinking in among Western leaders.

Improve the lot of women, improve the lives of all.

As U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton observed this month, "Well, you know the proverb, 'Give a man a fish and he'll eat for a day, but teach a man to fish and he'll eat for a lifetime'? Well, if you teach a woman to fish, she'll feed the whole village."

But Harper didn't mention anything about women getting educations or achieving economic parity.

As internationally known human rights activist Stephen Lewis told me Wednesday night, "None of the spectrum of women's rights and issues is encompassed in this announcement.

It doesn't include sexual violence, child marriage, sexual trafficking, female genital mutilation, economic autonomy, political representation, land rights or inheritance rights.

It includes none of the panoply of women's issues which consign women to subordinate positions around the world."

Hardly surprising considering Harper's government record on everything from women's reproductive rights to equality.

And so he plans to help women only as baby-makers while ignoring all the other Millennium Goals to end Poverty by 2015 on the international agenda, including "environmental sustainability."

(Incidentally, many NGOs, including CIDA, report that it's women who suffer most from climate change. Whether they have to walk farther to find water, food or fuel for cooking, their burdens are increased.) What's more, as Lewis emphasized, other nations have been on board what's known as the Clinton Global Initiative for more than two years. In 2007, Norway and the Netherlands committed \$1.2 billion to this. Last year, another \$5.3 billion was kicked in from other sources.

But, on Tuesday, International Cooperation Minister Bev Oda would not tell media how much Canada is actually committing.

"It takes a lot of chutzpah to pretend that somehow you're championing something that others have championed so vigorously before you," Lewis said.

It gets better – or worse, depending on your perspective.

On Wednesday, Liberal Status of Women critic Anita Neville told me, "Mr. Harper is not looking at these issues in Canada. Take a look at the aboriginal population. Look at maternal health care here. He's got a lot of work to do here. "

Indeed, this week, a massive new study published in the *Canadian Medical Association Journal* reported that Inuit infants die at more than three times the rate of other Canadian babies.

Last week, the *Journal of Paediatrics and Child Health* reported on Canada's sinking infant mortality record – we're now 24th in the world – while revealing Saskatchewan's shocking numbers of aboriginal infant deaths.

And yet, Saskatoon Conservative MP Brad Trost is campaigning to eliminate Canada's funding to the International Planned Parenthood Federation – which is not only about contraception but also about maternal health care.

Concludes Lewis: "I think it's pretty cynical but, now that they're doing it, maybe they'll be forced into making some financial commitment."

Women are watching, and waiting.

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